

Sea monsters and mermaids in Scottish folklore: Can these tales give us information on the historic occurrence of marine animals in Scotland?

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Abstract

*The folklore of the highlands and islands of Scotland includes many stories about sightings of sea monsters and mermaids. However, several of these stories contain descriptions of unusual features that are also distinct characteristics of living marine animals, notably manatees (*Trichechus spp.*), leatherback turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) and several cetacean species, including the narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*). It is suggested that an analysis of folklore could provide information on the historical distribution and occurrence of certain distinctive marine animal species.*

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The highlands and islands of Scotland are a rich source of legends and folklore attached to the sea. In particular, legends abound about mermaids, sea serpents and other such creatures, the most famous being tales of the selkies, or seal-people, and water horses, or kelpies. Are all of these legends figments of the imagination, invented during the long, cold, dark winter nights, no doubt aided by the odd dram of whisky or two? Or do seeds of truth lie buried in this folklore? This paper discusses some of the more famous legends of Scottish sea beasts and examines whether the old tales may contain partial truths, given the known or speculative historical distribution of some notable species of marine animals.

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Sea monsters

Many famous sea monsters are found in tales from the highlands of Scotland. For example, the sea monster “Morag” reportedly inhabits the waters of Loch Morar. The most famous of Scotland’s aquatic monsters is of course “Nessie,” who is said to live in the waters of Loch Ness. One of the first records of the Loch Ness monster was in 565 AD. The Isle of Iona’s most famous inhabitant, Saint Columba, was visiting the east coast of Scotland near what is now the city of Inverness, when locals saw a sea monster heading toward a swimming man. After they entreated St. Columba to act, he dutifully commanded the creature to let the swimmer be, and the man was saved (Taylor and Taylor 1999). Interestingly, this incident was said to have happened not in Loch Ness itself, but in the adjoining River Ness, which not only connects to the sea, but is frequented by various marine mammals, including minke whales (*Balaenoptera acutorostrata*). It would have been unusual for landspeople to recognize minke whales, but Columba would have been familiar with them, living as he did in the Hebridean Islands, which have a high abundance of minke whales (Shrimpton and Parsons 2000). It is also interesting to note that at that particular time, in the languages of scholars, the word for whale (Greek: κητος; Latin: cetos) was the same as the word for sea monster, or indeed any large sea creature (Rice 1998). So was the first record of the Loch Ness monster actually one of the first records of a minke whale in the Moray Firth?

Another story linked with St. Columba was recounted by Adomnán of Iona at the end of the seventh century. In this tale, Columba warned two monks travelling from the Isle of Iona to the nearby Isle of Tiree of a “monster of the deep” (Sharpe 1995). On their voyage, the two monks encountered “a whale of extraordinary size, which rose like a mountain above the water, its jaws open to show an array of teeth” (Sharpe 1995). Just as in the Moray Firth, minke whales are commonly sighted in the Inner Hebrides (Shrimpton and Parsons 2000), but the clear description of teeth suggests an encounter with a large odontocete (toothed whale). A possible suspect for the creature encountered is a killer whale (*Orcinus orca*), a cetacean that can grow to 9 m in length (Ford 2002) and would seem massive to two monks paddling a small boat or coracle, although there is no mention of the killer whale’s distinctive black and white coloration. The only other likely toothed whale that might have been encountered would have been the sperm whale (*Physeter macrocephalus*), but the behavior of such animals does not match the description. Killer whales will often “spyhop” to

observe boats and may indeed open their mouths to display an impressive array of teeth. These whales have been recorded in the waters off the Isles of Iona and Tiree in recent years (Shrimpton and Parsons 2002), and Adomnán's tale could, therefore, indicate that this particular species has inhabited these waters for at least 1,400 years.

Less conjecture is required for one easily identifiable record of a sea monster that was made on the Isle of Arran in July 1931 by a doctor from Glasgow and his daughter (Fleming 2002). The doctor observed what he took to be a boat on a rock a short way up the beach. As he and his daughter approached, the creature turned a head toward him that the doctor described as "*parrot-shaped – that is to say, it had a kind of beak. It was a light grey in colour*" (Fleming 2002). He also described the creature as being longer than an elephant and noted that on their approach, "*it wobbled off the rocks into the sea. It made off at a good pace and left a considerable wake in the sea.*"

The description of the sea creature sounds conspicuously like a turtle, possibly a leatherback turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), a creature that can grow to be almost 3 m in length and weigh up to nearly a tonne. The shell of this particular species is covered in leathery skin instead of shell plates and is ridged: a shape reminiscent of a boat's keel. Leatherback turtles have been sighted in Scottish waters on a relatively regular basis in recent years (Langton et al. 1996; Godley et al. 1998; Pierpoint 2000), frequently following blooms of jellyfish in Scottish waters (Grant, Malpass and Beasley 1996); therefore, the doctor's tale suggests that leatherback sightings are not a recent occurrence after all, but have also been made historically.

Descriptions of the previously mentioned sea monster "Morag" also sound similar to leatherback turtles: a hump-like body and a serpent-like head, black coloration, and bumpy skin "like that of a reptile" (Hamilton 2003). One witness is said to have described the main part of the creature's body as resembling "half of a huge rugby ball" (Fleming 2002), which again is reminiscent of the shape of a marine turtle's body.

On the Isle of Skye, the legendary water horse or each uisge (sometimes called the kelpie) is described as an evil beast, which would urge a person to ride on its back and then dive to the depths of the sea, drowning its passenger. This beast also sounds suspiciously turtle-like. The creature was described in Gordon (1995) as having a mouth that had a hooked tip, similar to an eagle's beak, and its feet were tipped with claws and left footprints larger than those of elephants. Again, this sounds very much like a turtle from the description of the head, with the latter part of the descrip-

tion depicting the animal using its wide flippers to manoeuvre on land. It is certainly possible to ride on the back of an animal as large as a leatherback turtle, until the animal dives beneath the surface.

However, another sea monster reported from the Isle of Skye could only be a cetacean. The *biasd na srogaig*, or beast with the lowering horn, is an ungainly sea monster with a single horn in its forehead, which is undoubtedly a narwhal (*Monodon monoceros*). The present day distribution of the narwhal includes the Arctic Ocean, extending southwards into the North Atlantic, to as far south as 65°N off the coast of Greenland (Heide-Jørgensen 2002). With a distribution of such close proximity to Scottish waters, an occasional vagrant animal coming as far south as Scotland is feasible. Indeed, it is possible that regular sightings of narwhals in Scottish waters (particularly when the climate was colder in the Middle Ages), or the distribution of artifacts derived from stranded animals, may be one reason why the unicorn features so prominently in the royal arms of Scotland (Buczaki 2002).

Mermaids

The mermaids of the highlands and islands of Scotland, called *ceasg*, have been seen in both river and marine waters, and there are many stories about these creatures, which have the upper body of a woman and the lower half of a salmon. For example, in 1830 a boy on the Outer Hebridean island of Benbecula was reported to have thrown stones at a small figure that was turning and twisting in the sea (Fleming 2002). One of these stones purportedly hit the creature, which sank beneath the waves. A few days later a creature washed up on the shore that was described as the size of a 3- or 4-year-old child, but with breasts, and a lower body like a salmon, but without scales (Fleming 2002). It was reported that the local villagers subsequently made a coffin for the creature and buried it in Nunton graveyard (Fleming 2002).

Nearby on the Isle of Barra, a crofter saw what he thought at first was an otter on a reef, holding and eating a fish, but on closer inspection looked more like a bare-breasted woman in the water holding a child in her arms (Carmichael 1992).

Besides the Outer Hebrides, mermaids have also been reported in Sandside Bay, Caithness (on the eastern coast of Scotland) in 1809 and in Loch Inchard and Sanwood Bay in Sutherland in the early part of the 20th century (Fleming 2002). Also, on the east coast, the Aberdeen Chronicle on 20 August 1814 (in an article by G. McKenzie) described a sighting of a “merman” that occurred five days earlier from a fishing boat:

“...they observed, at a small distance from their boat, with its back towards them, half its body above water, a creature of tawny colour, appearing like a man sitting, with his body half bent.”

The description continues, “... he had small eyes, a flat nose, his mouth was large, and his arms of an extraordinary length. Above the waist, he was shaped like a man...from the waist downwards, his body tapered considerably or, as they expressed it, like a large fish without scales.”

However, the best description of a mermaid comes from the early nineteenth century (Nicolson 1981) from the Shetlands. A fishing boat from Cullivoe reportedly caught a mermaid on a hook, and although the fishermen threw the creature back in the sea, they gave a vivid description (Nicolson 1981):

“About three feet long, with breasts like those of a woman and short arms with fingers like a human being ...The head was not so round as a human being’s and had no ears, although it had two small blue eyes. In place of a nose there were two small openings immediately above the mouth, which was wide enough to admit a man’s fist. From the waist down the body tapered off to a tail which resembled that of a halibut.”

This description suggests the most probable source of the mermaid legends: the manatee (*Trichechus spp.*). Manatees are herbivorous marine mammals belonging to the order Sirenia. They have never been recorded in the British Isles; they inhabit the waters of the southeastern United States and the West Indies (*Trichechus manatus*; Reynolds and Powell 2002). The warm waters of the Gulf Stream current bring a variety of warmer water creatures to the West Coast of Scotland, such as the above-mentioned turtles and even sunfish (*Mola mola*; pers. obs.); it is possible that manatees, which frequently migrate up the east coast of the United States to temperate latitudes, could have come across the Atlantic. Another potential source of manatees is West Africa, where the West African manatee (*Trichechus senegalensis*) is distributed as far north as Senegal (Reynolds and Powell 2002). Although it is hard to see how a normally coastal, warm-water species such as the manatee could have traversed across the Atlantic from the Caribbean, or northwards from Western Africa, it should be noted that there is a precedent.

In September 1996, a Fraser’s dolphin (*Lagenodelphis hosei*) was discovered stranded on the Outer Hebridean island of South Uist (Bones, Neil and Read 1998). The freshness of the carcass indicated that the animal had been alive in Scottish waters (Bones, Neil and Read 1998). This species of

dolphin has a tropical distribution, normally only extending as far north as the Caribbean or West Africa in the Atlantic (Jefferson, Leatherwood and Webber 1993); i.e., it has a distribution similar to that of the manatee. If a tropical dolphin species such as the Fraser's dolphin could be a vagrant visitor to Scottish waters, theoretically a manatee could too.

Manatees grow up to approximately 4 m long, with small eyes, no external ears and closable nostrils at the tip of a whiskered muzzle. Their fore flippers are broad, but short, and are tipped with "fingernails" (except in the Amazonian manatee *T. inunguis*). They have a convex, rounded tail, not unlike that of a salmon, rather than the concave tail of many marine fish, a distinction made in many descriptions of Scottish mermaids. Amongst the most distinctive characteristics of manatees, however, are the presence of external, pectoral mammary glands, or breasts, and their habit of holding young calves in their flippers to suckle, much like cradling a baby. These anatomical features, and this behavior, are again another characteristic of many mermaid legends in the highlands and islands of Scotland.

Conclusion

Although linking descriptions of creatures in folklore to actual living counterparts is only conjecture and assumes that descriptions of creatures are not merely figments of overactive imaginations and are in some key aspects accurate, there are some features of the described animals that are astonishingly similar to extant marine species. There is so little information on the historical distribution of marine species in this particular part of the world that even tentative indications of species distribution may prove useful, particularly to managers and conservationists who have the task of examining whether distribution ranges and occurrence of conservation-priority species have been reduced or whether some populations present historically have subsequently been extirpated.

Despite some of the above linkages being tenuous at best, some descriptions are surprisingly graphic or mention very definite, diagnostic features of certain species, and may indeed be documentation of a genuine sighting of a living marine species. Detailed descriptions of animals with unique characteristics, such as narwhals and leatherback turtles, indicate that the distribution of these animals has encompassed Scottish waters for decades, or even hundreds of years, before being recorded by modern scientists. A more detailed inventory of the occurrence of sea monsters in Scottish folklore, and the first published appearance of descriptions of such creatures, may help to give us more information on the historical distribution of these species. Information on historical distribution would be par-

ticularly interesting when compared to historical oceanographic information, and could, for example, illuminate changing patterns of distribution related to climate change.

The sightings of mermaids that bear an uncanny resemblance to manatees also suggest that vagrant individuals could have been sighted in Scottish waters, a theory which is rendered plausible by the recent report of a tropical dolphin species (Bones, Neil and Read 1998) that normally has a distribution similar to that of manatees. It would be interesting to compare mermaid folklore in Scotland to similar tales and reports from other areas of western Europe to discover if vagrant manatees could indeed have been common historically, indicating a greater abundance of animals and wider distribution than currently observed.

Although descriptions of sea monsters in folklore may initially appear fanciful, on closer inspection they can sometimes reveal characteristics and features that may be recognizable by marine biologists as diagnostic of living marine animals. So even the most unusual tales of sea monsters from the Scottish coast may contain, deep within them, a small kernel of truth.

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* first published 1900

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